

1907

With the stylistic inconsistencies and primitivist impulses of *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Pablo Picasso launches the most formidable attack ever on mimetic representation.

Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* [1] has acquired a mythical status: it is a manifesto, a battlefield, a herald of modern art. Fully conscious that he was producing a major work, Picasso threw everything into its elaboration: all his ideas, all his energy, all his knowledge. We now know *Les Femmes d'Alger* as one of the "most worked-upon" canvases ever, and due attention is paid to the sixteen sketchbooks and numerous studies in various media that Picasso devoted to its making—not counting the drawings and paintings produced in the picture's immediate wake, in which Picasso further explored a whole range of avenues opened up by the painting during its fast-paced genesis.

But if no modern picture has been as much discussed during the last quarter of a century—with book-length essays and even an entire exhibition with a two-volume catalogue glorifying it—this plethora of commentary follows a striking dearth of discussion. Indeed, the painting long remained in quasi obscurity—one could even say that it was *resisted*. (A telling anecdote of this resistance: it seems that at the end of the twenties, two decades after *Les Femmes d'Alger*'s completion, the collector Jacques Doucet intended to bequeath the picture to the Musée du Louvre, but the museum refused the offer, as it had done with the Cézannes of the Gustave Caillebotte bequest in 1894). Late recognition is the stuff of which legends are made, but what is so particular in this case is that the painting's deferred reception is not just linked to but also commanded by its subject matter and formal structure: *Les Femmes d'Alger* is above all a work about beholding, about the trauma engendered by a visual summons.

Circumstances played a role in this spectacular delay. To begin with the painting had almost no public life for thirty years. Until Doucet bought it from Picasso for a song in 1924—at the urging of André Breton and to the immediate regret of the artist—*Les Femmes d'Alger* had moved out of the artist's studio only once or twice, and then only during World War I: for two weeks in July 1916, in a semiprivate exhibition organized by the critic André Salmon at the Salon d'Antin (during which the painting acquired its present title), and possibly in the joint exhibition of Matisse's and Picasso's work in January–February 1918, organized by the dealer

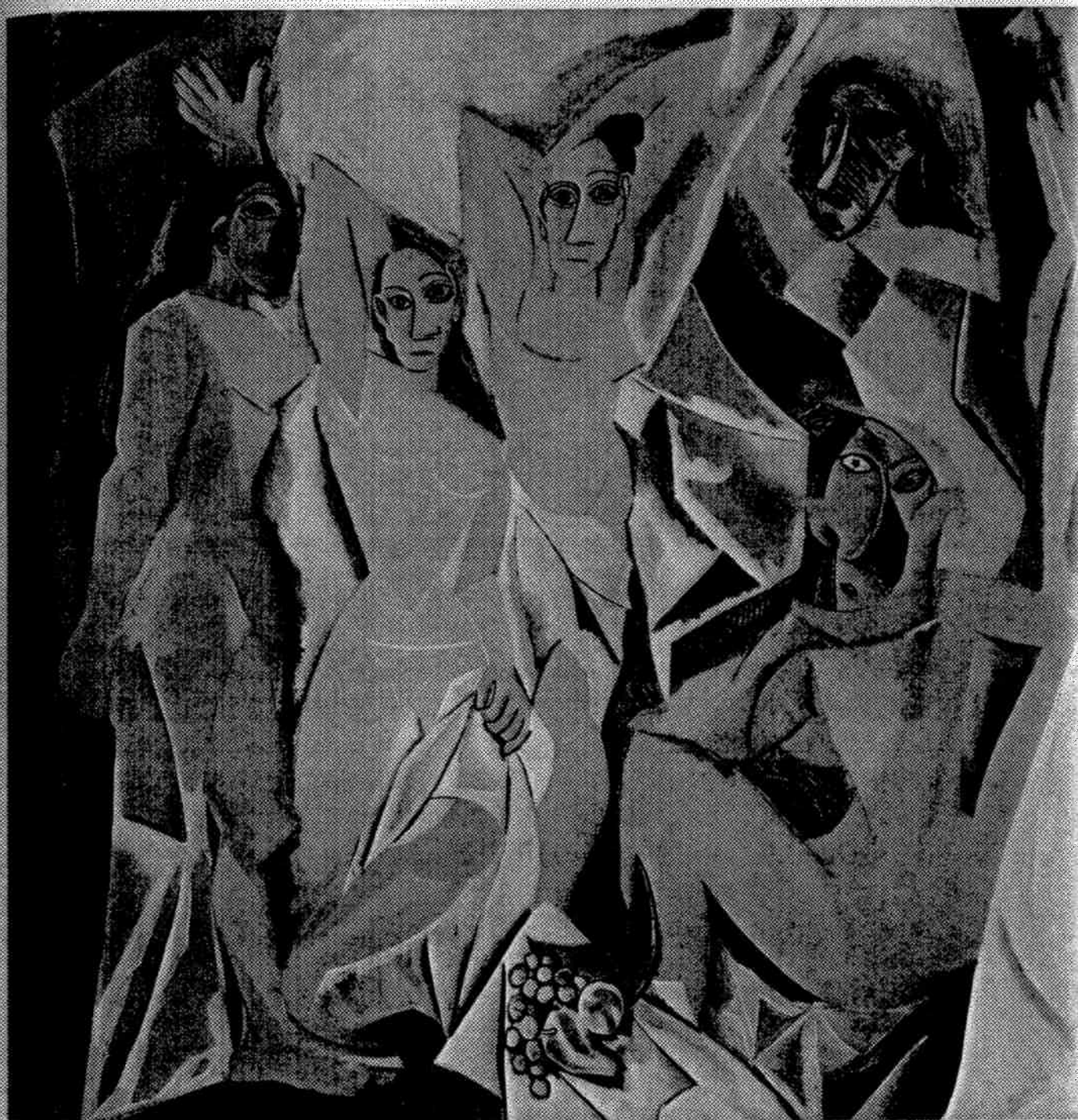
Paul Guillaume in Picasso's studio immediately after its completion, but access to it had rapidly dwindled (because of Picasso's numerous moves, often to cramped quarters, and his understandable desire always to show the latest crop of his protean and ever-changing production, the canvas was rarely on view even for the circle of the artist's intimates, which accounts for the paucity of their comments). Once in Doucet's possession, the painting was visible only by appointment, until it was sold by his widow to a dealer in the fall of 1937. Immediately shipped to New York, it was then bought by the Museum of Modern Art, where it became the museum's most precious fixture—the end of *Les Femmes d'Alger*'s private life.

The literature roughly follows a similar pattern. The painting was not even specifically named in the rare early articles that devoted a passage to it (by Gelett Burgess in 1910, André Salmon in 1912, and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler in 1916 and 1920). Furthermore, it was only very rarely reproduced before its landing in New York: after Burgess's journalistic piece ("The Wild Men in Paris," in the May 1910 issue of the *Architectural Record*), its reproduction was not published until 1925, in the journal *La Révolution surréaliste* (by no means a bestseller), and to appear in a monograph on the artist it had to await Gertrude Stein's [2] *Picasso* of 1938. Shortly thereafter,

▲ Alfred H. Barr's *Picasso: Forty Years of His Art*, which functioned as the catalogue of the Museum of Modern Art's 1939 Picasso retrospective, began the process of *Les Femmes d'Alger*'s canonization. But Barr's seminal account, which received its definitive touch in 1951, when his text was revised for the publication of *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art*, and which became the standard view of the painting, consolidated rather than broke down the walls of resistance that had encircled the work since its inception. Barr's view was not

A "transitional picture"?

Before the publication of Steinberg's study, the consensus was that *Les Femmes d'Alger* was the "first Cubist painting" (and thus, as Barr puts it, a "transitional picture," perhaps more important for what it



1 • Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O Version O)*, June–July 1907
Oil on canvas, 243.8 x 233.7 (80 x 78)

announced than as a work in itself). Barr had ignored the corollary of this notion in Kahnweiler's account, namely that the picture had been left unfinished, but this idea was nevertheless accepted by everyone else, and most authors marked it by criticizing the picture's "lack of unity." The stylistic discrepancy between the canvas's left and right sides was seen as a function of Picasso's rapid shift of interest from the archaic Iberian sculpture that had helped him finish his *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* [2] in the late summer of 1906 to

African art, which he had finally encountered with a new impact and coherence during a visit to the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro midway through the elaboration of *Les Femmes d'Alger*. The quest for sources did not stop there: Barr had named Cézanne, Matisse, and El Greco; others would add Gauguin, Ingres, and Manet.

Though Barr had published three of Picasso's preliminary studies for *Les Femmes d'Alger*, he had merely paid lip service to them and no attention at all to the many others already made available in



2 • Pablo Picasso, *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, late summer 1906

Oil on canvas, 100 x 81.3 (39 1/4 x 32)

Gertrude Stein (1874–1946)

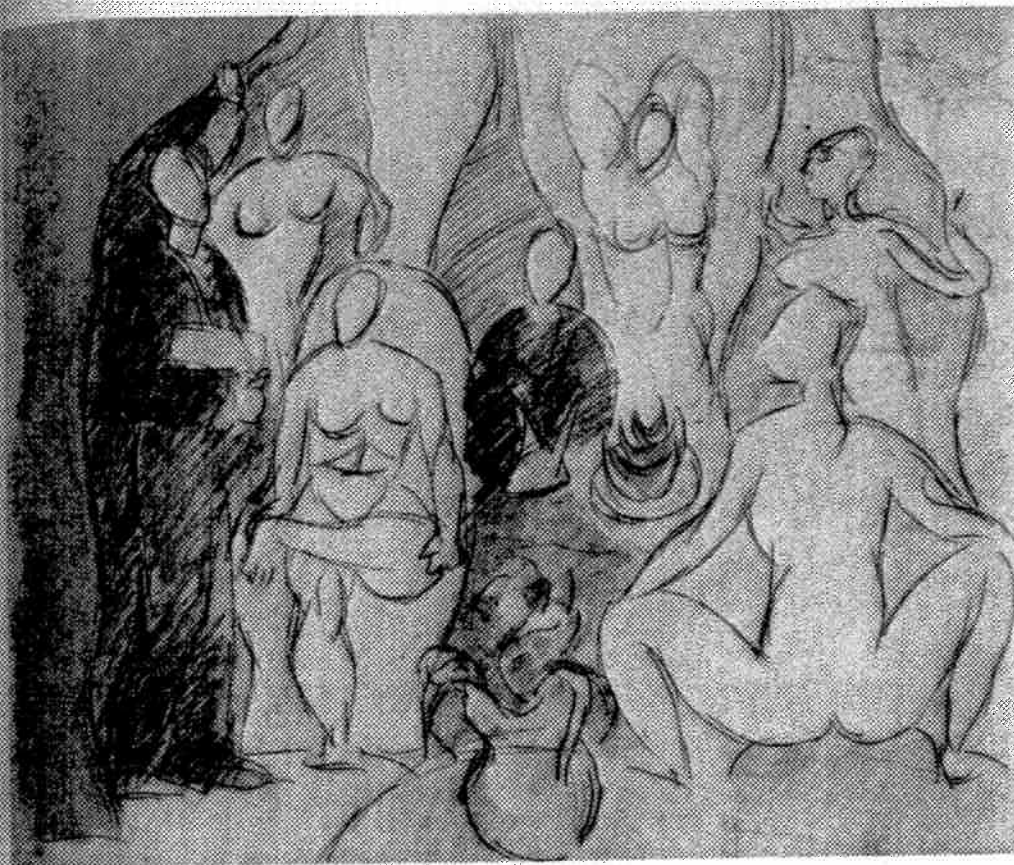
The youngest child of an upper-middle-class, American-Jewish family, the writer Gertrude Stein spent her first years in Europe, her youth in Oakland, and her university time at Harvard and The Johns Hopkins Medical School, before joining her older brother Leo in Paris in the winter of 1904–5. Buying Matisse's *The Woman with a Hat* from the 1905 Salon des Indépendants, she and Leo began avidly to collect advanced painting and to entertain artists and writers at their home on the rue de Fleurus. Deeply influenced by her sense of modernist composition, which, following her understanding of Cézanne, she saw as creating a uniform emphasis, without internal hierarchy, center, or "frame," she determined to capture the "object as object" with each aspect of it equally compelling and alive: "Always and always, Must write the hymn of repetition." Between 1906 and 1911, corresponding to the development of Cubism, she put this formal principle to work in her massive novel *The Making of Americans*. By 1910, Leo had turned against Picasso and his Cubist "funny business," and by 1913 he had separated his half of their collection to move to Florence. Gertrude continued to live on the rue de Fleurus with her lifelong companion Alice B. Toklas. Her accounts of her special friendship with Picasso are found in *Matisse, Picasso and Gertrude Stein* (1933), *Picasso* (1938), and *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933).

Christian Zervos's *catalogue raisonné* of Picasso's work, then in progress. In its early state, the composition consisted of seven figures in a theatrical arrangement derived from the Baroque tradition, replete with the usual curtains opening onto a stage [3]. In the center, a clothed sailor was seated among five prostitutes, each of whom was turning her head toward an intruder, a medical student entering at the left holding a skull in his hand (replaced by a book in some studies). For Barr, this morbid scenario, which he saw as "a kind of *memento mori* [reminder of death] allegory or charade" on the wages of sin, could be all the more easily dispensed with since Picasso himself had quickly dropped it. In the final version, Barr wrote, "all implications of a moralistic contrast between virtue (the man with the skull) and vice (the man surrounded by food and woman) have been eliminated in favour of a purely formal figure composition, which as it develops becomes more and more dehumanized and abstract."

In his essay, Steinberg dismissed most of these views, which by then had turned into clichés. The picture could not be reduced to a "purely formal figure composition" that would make it (according to the rather unsophisticated view offered of Cubism at the time) a mere forerunner of things to come. Picasso had indeed abandoned the "*memento mori* allegory," but not the sexual thematics of the painting (which is undoubtedly why Steinberg borrowed as the title of his piece one of the first names given to the picture by

Picasso's friends, "Le Bordel philosophique" [The Philosophical Brothel]). Furthermore, *Les Femmes d'Alger*'s lack of stylistic unity was not an effect of haste but a deliberate strategy: it was a late decision, to be sure, but in keeping with the elimination of the two male figures and the adoption of an almost square, vertical format, less "scenic" than that of all the studies for the general composition of the picture. And the primitivizing appeal to African art was not just happenstance (Picasso had been introduced to African art by Matisse in 1906 [4], months before his decision to shift the mask-like faces of the two *demoselles* on the right from an "Iberian" to an "African" model [5]); it shared in the thematic organization of the painting, even if Picasso later denied its significance.

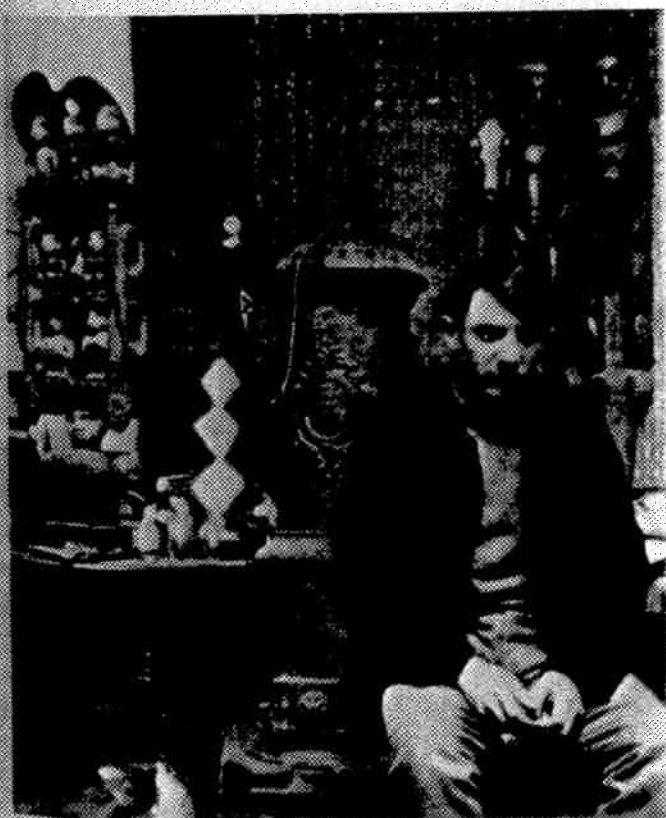
Rejecting Barr's "*memento mori*," Steinberg changed the terms of the allegory put aside by Picasso from those of "death versus hedonism" to those of "cool, detached learning versus the demands of sex." Both the book and the skull present in Picasso's studies indicate that the medical student is the one who does not participate; he does not even look at the *demoselles*. As for the timid sailor, he is there to be initiated by the fearsome females. His androgyny in many sketches sharply contrasts with his phallic attribute: the *porron* (a wine flask with an erect spout) on the table. Soon the sailor disappeared and the student underwent a gender switch. In the completed canvas he is replaced by the standing nude opening the curtain on the left. Conversely, the bodies of several



Below left
4 • Photograph of Picasso in his studio in the Bateau-Lavoir, Paris, 1908

Below
5 • Pablo Picasso, *Study for the Head of the Crouching Demoiselle*, June–July 1907
Gouache on paper, 63 x 48 (24 1/2 x 18 7/8)

3 • Pablo Picasso, *Medical Student, Sailor, and Five Nudes in a Bordello* (composition study for *Les Femmes d'Alger*), March–April 1907. Crayon drawing, 47.6 x 76.2 (18 3/4 x 30)



demoiselles were masculine in many drawings. There is enough cumulative evidence, then, to determine that while he was working on the picture Picasso's thematic concern revolved around the primordial question of sexual difference, and that of the fear of sex. So his problem seems to have been how to hold onto this theme while relinquishing the allegory.

This is where the stylistic disjunction of the final canvas comes into play, and not only that but also the utter isolation of the five prostitutes vis-à-vis one another, and the suppression of clear spatial coordinates. (On close inspection, the discrepancies are even stronger than Barr had noted, and they do not concern only the right-hand "African" side of the picture: the hand of the standing *demoiselle* who replaced the student at the far left seems severed from her body, and the sketchbooks reveal, as Steinberg notes, that her immediate neighbor, most often read as standing, is in fact lying down even though she has been verticalized and made parallel to the picture's surface.) Whereas in the first scenario the characters react to the student's entrance and the spectator looks on from outside, in the finished painting "this rule of traditional narrative art yields to an anti-narrative counter-principle: neighboring figures share neither a common space nor a common action, do not communicate or interact, but relate singly, directly, to the spectator.... The event, the epiphany, the sudden entrance, is still the theme—but rotated through 90 degrees towards a viewer conceived as the picture's opposite pole." In other words, it is the work's lack of stylistic and scenic unity that binds the painting to the spectator: the core of the picture is the frightful gaze of the *demoiselles*, particularly those with the deliberately monstrous faces on the right. Their "Africanism," according to the ideology of the time that made Africa the "dark continent," is a device designed to fend off the beholder. (An old word derived from the Greek and meaning "having the power to avert evil" describes the intimidating glare of Picasso's nudes particularly well: it is *apotropaic*.) The picture's complex structure, as William Rubin showed in the longest study ever devoted to the work (which emphasized Picasso's deep-seated death anxiety), concerns the link that ties Eros to Thanatos, that is, sex to death.

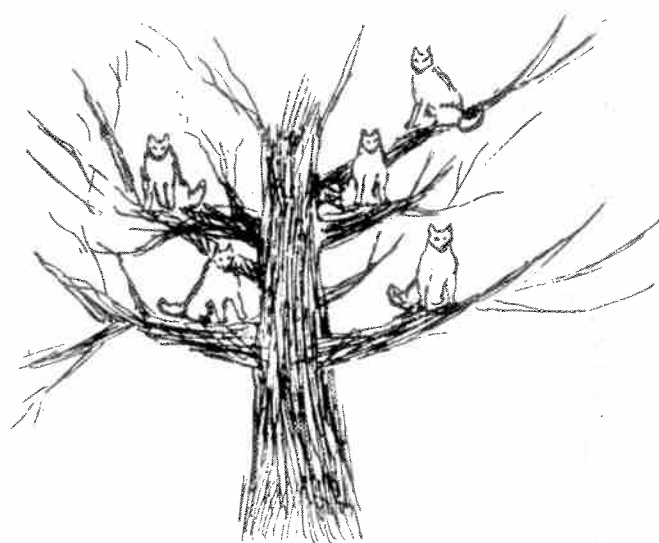
The trauma of the gaze

- ▲ We are now moving into Freudian territory, a fairly recent step in the literature devoted to the painting. Several psychoanalytic scenarios dealing with the "primal scene" and the "castration complex" apply amazingly well to *Les Femmes d'Alger*. They help us understand both the suppression of the allegory and the brutality of the finished picture. One thinks, here, either of the remembered childhood dream of Freud's most famous patient, Sergei Pankejeff (1887–1979)—the "Wolf-Man" [6]—in which the boy found himself petrified as his window opened and he was stared at by motionless wolves (the dream being the aftereffect of the shock of the primal scene [his witnessing parental intercourse])—or of Freud's short text on the head of the Medusa, with all its multitude of mean-

ings. These include the notion that the Medusa's head is the female sex organ—the sight of which arouses castration anxiety in the young male; the image of castration itself (decapitation); and the denial of castration, on the one hand by a multiplication of penises (her hair consists of snakes) and, on the other, by its power to turn the spectator to stone, in other words, into an erect, albeit dead, phallus.

In front of Picasso's painting, too, the beholder is nailed to the floor by the whores who address him more violently, as Steinberg points out, than by any picture since Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. In switching from the "narrative" (allegory) to the "iconic" mode, to use the terms employed by Rubin, that is, from the historical tone of stories ("Once upon a time") to the personal threat ("Look at me; I'm watching you"), Picasso both revealed the fixity of the viewer's position as established by the monocular perspective on which Western painting had been based and, by recasting it as petrification, demonized it. The undiminished power of *Les Femmes d'Alger* lies in this very operation, called the "return of the repressed": in it, Picasso highlighted the contradictory libidinal forces at work in the very act of beholding, making of his whole picture the Medusa's head. Bordello pictures are part of a long tradition within the genre of erotic art (a tradition that Picasso knew well: he had long admired Degas's monotypes and for years had yearned to collect them—a dream he could fulfill only late in life). These soft-porn scenes are meant to gratify the voyeurism of male, heterosexual, art lovers. Picasso overthrows this tradition: interrupting the story, the gaze of his *demoiselles* challenges the (male) spectator by signifying to him that his comfortable position, outside the narrative scene, is not as secure as he might think. No wonder the painting was resisted for so long.

One of its early adversaries no doubt understood, at least partially, what was going on. Matisse was furious when he saw the painting (some accounts say he was in stitches, but this amounts to



6 • Sergei C. Pankejeff's sketch of his remembered childhood dream (c. 1910), published in Sigmund Freud's "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis," 1916



7 • Pablo Picasso, *Three Women*, 1908
 Oil on canvas, 200 x 178 (78 1/2 x 70 1/2)

the same thing). He was a bit like Poussin saying of Caravaggio (to whom we owe the best representation of Medusa's head, and who was criticized in his time for being unable to "compose a real story") that he had been "born to destroy painting." Undoubtedly, rivalry was a sting that sharpened Matisse's perception (just as it had stimulated Picasso's), for just a year and a half earlier Matisse had completed his breakthrough canvas *Le Bonheur de vivre*, whose thematic is in many ways very close to that of Picasso's picture (one detects in it the same conflictual imagery revolving around the castration complex). Matisse knew that this canvas (which Picasso saw every time he went to dinner at the house of Gertrude and Leo Stein) had strongly impressed the younger artist, notably for its syncretic cannibalizing of a whole array of historical sources. For Picasso, one of the most devastating challenges must have been the forceful way in which Matisse had co-opted Ingres's *The Turkish Bath*, which had struck both artists at the 1905 Salon d'Automne: how tame was the Ingrisme of his own Rose period, by comparison, particularly of *The Harem*, painted in Gosol in the summer of 1906, just a few months before he tackled *Les Femmes d'Alger* and only a few weeks before he "painted in" the face of Gertrude Stein's portrait! Meanwhile, Matisse had also thrown in another challenge: shortly after introducing Picasso to African art he had painted his *Blue Nude*, the first canvas ever to de-aestheticize the traditional motif of the female nude explicitly by way of "primitivism." And now Picasso was combining both acts of parricide against the Western tradition: juxtaposing contradictory sources into a medley that annulled their decorum and their historical significance, and at the same time borrowing from other cultures. In both *Le Bonheur de vivre* and *Les Femmes d'Alger*, the parricide was astutely linked to an Oedipal thematics, but Picasso, in focusing his attack on the very condition of beholding, had carried the struggle against mimesis much further.

The crisis of representation

We can now return to the standard, pre-Steinberg assumption that *Les Femmes d'Alger* was the "first" Cubist painting. While certainly wrong if one reads early Cubism as a kind of geometric stylization of volumes, this assumption makes sense if Cubism is understood as a radical questioning of the rules of representation. In grafting an Iberian masklike face onto the bust of Gertrude Stein, in conceiving of a face as a given sign that could be borrowed from a vast repertory, Picasso had called the illusionistic conventions of depiction into question. But in *Les Femmes d'Alger* he pushed the idea that signs are migratory and combinatory, and that their signification depends upon their context, even further, though he did not fully explore it. This would be the work of Cubism as a whole, whose origin can then be located in *Three Women* of 1908 [7], in which Picasso strove to display a single signlike unit (the triangle) for every element of the painting, whatever it was supposed to depict. But several studies for the face of the crouching *demoiselle* at the lower right—the site of the most startling attack on the very idea of

beauty in relation to woman—reveal that he had sensed the endless metaphoric possibilities of the sign system he was inventing: in these studies, we can see that face is in the process of being transformed into a torso [5]. Yet these amorphous experiments were put aside and one had to wait for Picasso's second examination of African art in his collages, in 1912, for the full implication of his semiological impulse to be reached. Thus *Les Femmes d'Alger* was a traumatic event; and its profound effect was deferred for Picasso as well: it took him the whole adventure of Cubism to be able to account for what he had done.

Further Reading

William Rubin, "From 'Nude' to 'Liberated' Picasso: The Problem of Beauty in *Les Femmes d'Alger* and the Role of *Les Femmes d'Alger* in *Les Femmes d'Alger*," *The Art Journal*, 1983, 42, 1-10.

William Rubin, "The Genesis of *Les Femmes d'Alger*," *Artforum*, 1983, 21, 1-10.

Julien Green and Howard Green, "Critical Anticipation of *Les Femmes d'Alger*," *Artforum*, 1983, 21, 1-10.

Haléne Seckel (ed.), *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025.

Leo Steinberg, "The Philosophical Subject" (1972), reprinted in *Leo Steinberg*, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025.